DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 223 CS 205 650

AUTHOR Wilson, Dawn
TITLE From Confidence to Competence: The Journal as Steppingstone.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assignments; College English; Higher Education; Learning Activities; Sequential Approach; *Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Process; Revision (Written Composition); *Student Journals

ABSTRACT

A journal-based college composition program has been developed that links journal writing to the development of competence in more formal writing. Students write both free choice and assigned entries, and their entries become the basis of all the themes they write: in-class assignments focus on the improvement of specific aspects of the journal entries. Each student's journal is given an end-of-semester grade based largely on effort. Assignments are sequential and are based on a synthesis of prominent educators' views on appropriate sequential writing activities. They progress from preliminary free writing exercises to personal and narrative writing, and then to descriptive, expository, and persuasive writing. The concept of invention is introduced, and the distinction between process and product--between journal entry and theme--is stressed. Students are given help in transforming journal entries into themes, in inventing new material, in reorganizing and rearranging existing ideas, in detecting stylistic weaknesses, and in rejecting inappropriate material. A journal-based composition program provides needed writing practice while at the same time helping students become competent, proficient writers. (GT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Dawn Wilson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED188223

From Confidence to Competence:

The Journal as Steppingstone

Dawn Wilson

Many composition teachers ask students to keep journals, usually defining the journal as a repository for significant thoughts and observations, but rarely making any connections between writing done in the journal and writing done for a grade. In this vein, Robert Herrick refers to the journal as a "record of growth, thinking, and daydreaming"[1] without mentioning any relationship that journal writing might have to course content. As such, the journal is a valid supplemental assignment: it provides writing practice, it gives students an opportunity to react to and comment on class discussion, and it offers them a chance to explore ideas and feelings. But the journal can be more than an isolated entity. Journal writing can be an integral part of the composition course, useful in developing students' writing ability and in providing them with an understanding of the writing process.

Initially, students respond well to and perform successfully on nearly any kind of journal assignment, probably since journaling is risk-free and non-punitive. But students tire of it quickly. A study at SUNY of Buffalo reported that after the fifth week of non-directed journal keeping, student writing deteriorated in quality.[2] Having exhausted their stock of personal traumas and significant moments, students became repetitive. Because they related the same incidents with only minor variations, their entries grew trite.

As this experiment indicates, journal writing will not help develop students' writing ability unless it is tied to course content. The typical

CS205650

free-choice journal gives students much-needed practice in writing--if they keep up with it. Practice, however, is not enough. Donald Murray's comment about designing composition instruction is equally appropriate to journal format: "It is not enough to give students sufficient time to practice writing: without guidance they will simply write. . . in circles."[3]

How, then, can the journal be used once students have lost their initial fascination with free writing and recording personal crises? Citing the need for techniques and procedures which "help students gain access to the powers of the journal," G. Lynn Nelson laments the paucity of material on how "specifically to go about using it" in the classroom.[4] In response to this need, my presentation introduces an approach which links journal writing to the development of competence in more formal writing. I consider journal writing a skill-building, confidence-inspiring activity which can be a steppingstone to success on regular theme assignments.

My version of journal keeping combines freedom with practicality: some entries are free choice; others are designed to give students an opportunity to rehearse their ideas before becoming committed to them in themes. Each week, students write two free choice and two assigned entries. Every other week, a theme is due. Each theme must have some basis in a journal entry. As a result, students explore several possibilities before settling on a topic; thus, they are unlikely to choose an unworkable subject.

Helping students progress from journal entry to theme through in-class work which focuses on the processes involved in composing is an essential

part of my program. At the beginning of each class session, students—working alone or in pairs—are assigned journal tasks. At the beginning of a semester, I use activities such as "isolate the 'center of gravity' of a given entry," "discern places to add or delete material," "detect ways to re-organize the entry."[5] Later, when students have mastered the larger scope, I move to finer points. I begin class with journal activities designed to develop specific skills needed to write themes. Students are asked to read through their entries for different purposes on different days (only one task is given at a time): to add details, to improve word choice, to change sentence structure, to provide transitions, to invent material, or to construct more effective leads. So that students understand that this kind of work needs to be done on every assignment, such activities need to be repeated throughout the course.

I require students to submit journal entries with final drafts so that I can diagnose where their writing may have lost direction. Many times, for instance, students have not re-organized their original attempts when a more effective arrangement of ideas is clearly necessary. Other times, students have padded their themes with irrelevant material instead of attempting to stay with the journal idea, adding examples and details which support it. By checking the theme against its origin in a journal entry, I can offer insights useful to students when they revise.

At the end of the semester, the entire journal is awarded a grade based largely on effort. Since journal entries are prior to the rough draft stage in writing, they cannot be graded traditionally. Specific criteria which I use as a guideline include:

(1) a wide range of topics and ideas,

(2) ability to focus on a narrowed topic in some entries,

(3) use of concrete details and specific examples throughout,

(4) sufficient personal involvement in most entries to demonstrate reaction to and reflection about experience, and

(5) completion of assignments.

This kind of directed journal writing leads students toward proficiency in discrete writing skills. For instance, students who are expected to use concrete detail in their journal entries are more likely to use abundant detail in their themes; students who are asked to focus on their topic in some journal entries will be ready to write effective thesis sentences for their themes; and, most importantly, students who write journal entries before themes inevitably become involved in some revision, being prevented from submitting rough drafts as final copy.

Paramount to a journal-based composition program is the sequence of journal assignments which becomes, in effect, the sequence for the entire course. What succession of rhetorical modes best approximates the way students learn? What is the best developmental sequence? On this there is disagreement. James Britton feels that "expressive" writing is a "pivotal point from which other modes can be differentiated."[6] What he means is that since students write more effectively when they are writing for themselves, to clarify an idea or to express a feeling, they should be given many opportunities to write expressively before they are asked to assimilate the skills needed for more public prose. Similarly, James Moffett defines the sequential path as "a growth scale going from the personal

to the impersonal, from low to high abstraction, from undifferentiated to finely differentiated modes of discourse."[7] McCrimmon advocates a "cumulative sequence" beginning with "specification and descriptive writing, moving to comparison-contrast and classification, and concluding with persuasion."[8] Donald Murray's primary concern, however, is that the sequence of skills be based on the practice of experienced writers:

> The pattern which makes the most sense is one that duplicates in slow motion the steps taken swiftly and naturally by competent writers when they address themselves to any prose composition."[9]

Combining the essence of these views, after using preliminary free-writing exercises[10] as icebreaders, I move to personal writing and narrative writing (following Britton's and Moffett's lead); then, I move to more traditional modes—description, exposition, argumentation (using McCrimmon's idea of sequence). Throughout (as Murray would recommend), I supplement these assignments with in-class journal activities,such as those already mentioned, which offer insights into the composing process by leading students through different steps in writing as they progress from journal entry to theme.

Journal writing can help students in different ways at different stages of a composition course. In the beginning, when students are apprehensive about writing, casual journal assignments (such as "If I had a million dollars" or "If I could go anywhere in the world") tend to make writing interesting and non-threatening. At this stage, journal writing encourages students to get ideas down on paper. And since journal entries are not graded for mechanical flaws, students have the freedom to write quickly and comfortably. As

Donald Hall observes:

> It is essential. . . that daily writing not be corrected. In order to clear the passageway, in order to provi de that freedom that will develop the muscles of writing, the student must scribble away without worrying that anyone is looking over his shoulder." [11]

Thoughts do not have to go unsaid because the struggle to express them accurately was insurmountable.

Since it is important to continue the level of comfort which has been developed through initial journal entries, I assign some form of personal writing for the first theme. Of all the rhetorical modes they will study, it is the closest to journal writing; also, since students enjoy writing about their experiences, it is the least demanding. Even so, expressive writing does teach skills which will be valuable later. As students write about their experiences, either in narrative or essay form, they learn to stay with the story line and not to stray into irrelevancies; as they determine the point" of their narratives, they are learning how to generalize.

Descriptive writing comes next in my program, though some might choose to begin with it, inasmuch as specificity is vital to all writing. But descriptive writing is more difficult for students to control than personal writing: selecting an appropriate word to capture a sensory image is a demanding task. A strictly logical developmental sequence must, I feel, give way to a sequence based on the level of difficulty for students.

When I move to expository and persuasive writing, I first ask students to respond in their journals to topics which represent all the rhetorical patterns of organization to be covered: comparison-contrast, definition, classification, cause-effect. I give selected journal assignments from each category, any of which could later be expanded into themes. Then

I introduce students to the concept of invention. As Frank D'Angelo defines it," In its broadest sense, invention is any mental activity that will bring to conscious awareness something previously unknown."[12] Until this point, the mere act of responding to a set of journal topics is sufficient for students to discover an abundance of material; further, subjects for personal and descriptive writing often have a built-in organizational pattern. But since more structure is required in expository and argumentative essays, it is essential that a topic be carefully considered before it is selected for a theme; a set of directed "probe" questions or "heuristics" can lead writers into previously unexplored areas of their subjects, coaxing forth supplementary material and suggesting methods of development. By recording responses in their journals to such questions as "What are its parts?" and "In what respect is it like or unlike something else,"[13] students soon acquire a store of information from which thesis sentences emerge. An added benefit of this procedure is that students can choose, from many possibilities, the topic best suited to a given rhetorical pattern: subject finds form rather than form dictating subject.

Throughout the course, I stress the distinction between process and product--between journal entry and theme. So that students do not ever get the idea that a good journal entry is equivalent to a good paragraph or theme, I explain and illustrate the differences. In Linda Flower's terms, journal entries are examples of writer-based prose, while themes and paragraphs are reader-based.[14] Or, as Elaine Maimon puts it, journals, being akin to rough drafts, are like talking to family or friends, whereas formal writing is like talking to strangers.[15] Journals illustrate the kind of cognitive processing which results in process writing, while themes and

paragraphs should be though of as products. Journal entries can take the reader along through the discovery process as an idea is being formulated; themes and paragraphs should synthesize main points first and should be organized according to carefully thought-out plans.

The process of writing a journal entry, then, is different from the process of writing a theme. Writing a journal entry involves transcribing thoughts and ideas almost as quickly as they occur, a process that generates material. Finishing a theme involves recasting, shaping, and editing.

Students need instruction in transforming a journal entry into a theme. In the beginning, too much direction in completing the product--the theme--may be counter-productive. Students cannot possibly understand the entire composing process at the outset. At some point, however, students appreciate explanations of how to invent more material, how to re-organize and re-arrange existing ideas, how to detect stylistic weaknesses. Also, students must realize that they have to throw out any material which is not related to the main idea. Thus, when students select the journal entries which they would like to use as the basis for their theme assignment, the first step is to isolate the main point. Students might be told to write a one-sentence statement of purpose, based on the focal point in the journal entry. Next, students may benefit by listing in brainstorming fashion the details which come to mind now that the central issue has been determined. After this, some more writer-based prose is in order to clarify the topic and to elaborate on it./ Heuristic procedures may be helpful here. When enough material has been generated, the students should again read over their journal passages, underlining parts which

are significant. More list-making may be necessary before the next steps--outlining, deciding what the thesis will be, and determining the topic sentences for the individual paragraphs. Finally, it is time for the rough draft.

Since journal entries are assumed to be unfinished, students show an increased willingness to change them substantially as they re-work them. Rather than the superficial changes students make when they revise traditional themes (which are often no more carefully written than journal entries), students who revise journal entries do indeed recast and reshape their material. We should not expect the beginning paragraphs and themes to have been revised as extensively as the later ones will be, of course. The early essays will have more similarities to the journal entries in which they are based. But our goal should always be in sight. We should expect final essays to have been transformed. As Mina Shaughnessy puts it, final essays should give "various signs of having been wrought--that is, of the writer's having intervened in deliberate ways to change their wording or to correct errors."[16] This willingness to change what has been written is crucial.

Students benefit from as much writing practice as they can possibly get. Donald Hall maintains that the most valuable part of a good English course is daily writing practice.[17] A journal-based composition program provides this additional practice while at the same time helping students become competent, proficient writers.

Footnotes

[1]Robert Herrick, "Discovering the Journal," Teaching English in the Two Year College, 2 (1976), 92.

[2]Taylor Stoehr and staff, "Writing About Experience: A Report on Freshman English," College English, 32 (October, 1970), 9-44.

[3]Donald Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 217.

[4] G.Lynn Nelson, "Learning From Within: Ira Progroff and the Power of Personal Writing," Media and Methods (September, 1978), 111.

[5] Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[6] James Moffett, A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13 ((New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 371.

[7]James Britton, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Schools Council Publication, 1975), p. 163.

[8]James McCrimmon, "A Cumulative Sequence in Composition," English Journal, 55 (April, 1966), 426.

[9] Murray, p. 217.

[10]Ken Macrorie's Telling Writing (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, 1970) includes excellent ideas for anyone using either free writing or journal writing in a composition course.

[11]Donald Hall, Teaching Writing Well, 3rd edition (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1979), p. x.

[12]Frank D'Angelo, Process and Thought in Composition (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 27.

[13]D'Angelo, p. 31.

[14]Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," 41 (College English, September, 1979), 19-20.

[15]Elaine Maimon, "Talking to Strangers, 30 (College Composition and Communication, December, 1979), 367.

[16]Mina Shaugnessy, Errors and Expectations(New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 276.

[17]Donald Hall, x.